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CHASING FAE

The Watermelon Woman and Black Lesbian Possibility

by Laura L. Sullivan

Cheryl Dunye's 1996 film, *The Watermelon Woman*, is a groundbreaking, and rulebreaking, film. The first feature film made by a black lesbian filmmaker (McAlister), the film employs both deconstructive and realist techniques to examine the way that identity in contemporary U.S. culture is shaped by multiple forces, primarily race, gender, and sexual orientation. Encouraging viewers to consider the unstable, complex, and often contradictory nature of identity, the film is humorous yet politically engaging. In this paper, I consider the ways that the film works simultaneously to represent and to decenter the identity and history of a figure most invisible in the textual production of the dominant culture—the black lesbian.

The Watermelon Woman, an independent film made on a shoestring budget, experimentally combines narrative and documentary forms. The film's storyline centers on the life and work of Cheryl, a black lesbian woman filmmaker living in Philadelphia. Cheryl works in a video store and in an independent video business with her acerbic friend Tamara, also black and lesbian. Cheryl is making a film about an African-American actress named Fae "The Watermelon Woman" Richards, who appeared in Hollywood films in the 1930s and 1940s. The central narrative's plot concerns Cheryl's relationship with a white woman, Diana, and the parallels between Cheryl's experiences and the subject matter of her research: the life and work of Fae Richards, who was not only a black woman involved in film, but a lesbian who once had an affair with one of her white directors, a woman named Martha Page. Metafictionally, Cheryl often directly addresses the camera as she describes her progress in making the film within the film, and the film presents us with scenes of Cheryl creating her film, performing interviews, and undertaking archival research. The primary tension in the film occurs at the intersection of race and sexual orientation and addresses the feasibility—and politics—of black-white lesbian relationships.

The film also reworks filmic conventions, both traditional and postmodern, as it provokes the viewer's curiosity about this unknown "watermelon woman" actress. Many viewers find it "simply fascinating to follow along with Cheryl's detective work" as she searches for clues about this unknown black actress (McAlister). We participate in Cheryl's process of discovery as she learns about this historical figure with whom she increasingly identifies. The viewer does not discover until the film's end that the actress Fae "The Watermelon Woman" Richards never existed, and is, in fact, the creation of the film's writer and director, Dunye. I explore the implications of the way that the film draws upon and questions both fictional and documentary forms in more detail below. First, a consideration of how this film addresses the representation of members of marginalized groups.

De/Reconstructing Images of Black Women

In *Black Women as Cultural Readers*, Jacqueline Bobo asserts that “Black women are . . . knowledgeable recorders of their history and experiences and have a stake in faithfully telling their own stories” (36). In her first direct address of the viewer, Cheryl speaks to this imperative as she muses about what subject to use as the focus of her film: “I know it has to be about black women, because our stories have never been told.” As this remark indicates, Cheryl Dunye recognizes that the voices of black women have been absent from the dominant cultural production of texts in this century; her film seeks to address this elision.

Recent cultural critics point out that the primary images of black women in film have been largely harmful and inaccurate stereotypes. Bobo explains that throughout the history of Hollywood cinema, we find “a venerable tradition of distorted and limited imagery” of representations of black women, who have been limitedly characterized “as sexually deviant, as the dominating matriarchal figure, as strident, eternally ill-tempered wenches, and as wretched victims” (33). Bobo specifies that within this last category, classical Hollywood portrayed black women as domestic servants, while more recent texts focus on black women as “‘welfare’ mothers” (33). In *The Watermelon Woman*, viewers are exposed to this history while they are also asked to critique it.

The film’s central character, Cheryl, is fascinated by the unknown black actresses of early Hollywood cinema, while her friend Tamara chastises her for her interest in “all that nigger-mammy shit from the ’30s.” In her first monologue about her documentary, Cheryl tells viewers that she has been viewing tapes of 1930s and 1940s movies that have black actresses in them, exclaiming that she is “totally shocked” to discover that “in some of these films, the black actresses aren’t even listed in the credits.” In this way, Dunye the filmmaker comments on a real phenomenon, the historical invisibility of black women in film as well as the devaluation of their labor and identities, before she introduces us to the (fictitious) film that currently has her character Cheryl’s attention. Cheryl relates that when she first watched this film, she “saw the most beautiful black mammy, named Elsie.” Clearly intrigued by this actress, Cheryl insists that she show us a clip. Yet the “clip” from the video is typically racist and demeaning, containing a Civil War scene in which the mammy comforts a white woman, “Don’t cry Missy, Massa Charles is coming back—I know he is!” This constructed excerpt is familiar to us, as heirs to a media culture that routinely assigned black actresses to such roles, not that many decades ago, as emblemized by Hattie McDaniel in *Gone with the Wind* (1939). While Cheryl is aware of the exploitation of black women in cinema, she is still seduced by these images. As she explains to the viewer, she is going to make a film about this actress, known as “the watermelon woman” because “something in her face, something in the way she looks and moves, is serious, is interesting.”

Bobo notes that “Black female creative artists bring a different understanding of black women’s lives and culture, seeking to eradicate the harmful and pervasive images haunting their history” (5). Dunye’s film directly acknowledges the negative effects of the oppressive stereotypes with which black women have been imaged in the history of film. The title of the Fae Richards’ film with which Cheryl is most fascinated is telling in this regard, *Plantation Memories*. Through mechanisms such as the naming of this (fictional) film, Dunye comments on the historical continuity of the oppression of black women. She reflects how the legacy of slavery affects the lives of black women in the 20th century (and how this legacy also shapes

the representations of such lives). She also reminds us that early stereotypical depictions of black women continue to impinge on the lived experiences of black women today and continue to delimit the options available for black women producers of contemporary cultural texts.

In the case of black lesbian women, however, what is “haunting their history,” to use Bobo’s phrase, is not so much a history of damaging and false images, but, is, instead, a certain absence of participation in the representations of the mainstream media. Jewelle Gomez comments on the black lesbian’s “invisibility in American society” and explains that black lesbians “are the least visible group not only in the fine arts, but also in the popular media, where the message conveyed about the Lesbian of color is that she does not even *exist*, let alone use soap, drive cars, drink Coke, go on vacations, or do much of anything else” (110). Thus, Dunye’s film serves first to document the existence of black lesbians, in much the same way as Julie Dash’s film *Daughters of the Dust* (1992) was unique in featuring a group that is not typically the visual or diegetic focus of most films—black women. As bell hooks comments in a dialogue with Julie Dash, “To de-center the white patriarchal gaze, we indeed have to focus on someone else for a change. And . . . the film takes up that group that is truly on the bottom of this society’s race-sex hierarchy. Black women tend not to be seen, or to be seen solely as stereotype” (40). Dash and hooks discuss the discomfort of some viewers of *Daughters* . . . in having to “spend . . . two hours as a black person, as a black woman” (40). While black women flocked to the film in droves (Bobo 9), black men and non-black viewers needed to connect with the film through mechanisms other than direct identification (Dash and hooks 40). Viewers from these subject positions were thus called upon to be more actively involved in the process of textual reception.

Dunye’s film likewise calls upon an active viewer, but with the added dimension of sexual orientation. For if the black woman has been invisible or stereotyped in popular culture, the black lesbian woman has been even more invisible, and when present, this figure has caused even black women discomfort. (For example, Dash reports that the actress who played one of the black lesbian lovers in her film, Yellow Mary, later denied that her character was gay (Dash and hooks 66).) *The Watermelon Woman* foregrounds black lesbian identity throughout, but it does so in a way that invites the reader to connect the history of the black lesbian actress who rose to fame through a series of denigrating roles as servant and slave, with the present black lesbian filmmaker before us, Cheryl Dunye, who is playing a version of herself.

For example, in scenes filmed in Cheryl’s home, the tape of *Plantation Memories* plays on the television, while Cheryl, a bandana tied around her head, lip syncs the mammy’s part in the film’s scene, exaggeratedly mimicking the fawning pretense of the black servant played by Fae Richards. Likewise, in another series of scenes in the film, Cheryl sits in front of her video camera, holding several postcards and pictures of the Watermelon Woman in her hands, hiding her face. The camera is tightly focused on the images of the Watermelon Woman that Cheryl leafs through, showing these pictures to the viewer, but Cheryl is visible in the background, an eye peering around these representations of the actress, a gesture of connection. Yet in the end what we have is a constructed history connected to a constructed but “real” figure, Cheryl the character standing in for Cheryl Dunye the filmmaker.

Commenting on the uniqueness of *Daughters of the Dust*, hooks notes that there are “very few other films where the camera really zooms in on black women’s faces” (52). Dunye also employs this technique, and there are many scenes in which the faces and bodies of black women, in this case black lesbians, are prominent. These typically invisible bodies are rendered visible in a number of ways. First, there are many closeups of Cheryl in the segments where she directly

addresses her video camera. Second, there are explicit love scenes that break new ground. For while viewers of alternative cinema have previously seen the naked bodies of white lesbians, such as Patricia Charbonneau and Helen Shaver in Donna Deitch's *Desert Hearts* (1985), and even including *The Watermelon Woman's* Guin Turner who starred in the white lesbian film *Go Fish* (1994), love scenes that feature black lesbian women are rare. Patricia Rozema's *When Night Is Falling* (1995) is a notable exception in this regard, as it depicts a romance between a black lesbian woman and a previously straight white French woman. However, while that film's focus is on the white woman's "conversion" to lesbianism, *The Watermelon Woman* centrally engages the interracial dimension of its lesbian romances. The subjects of Cheryl's interviews about Fae Richards debate the nature of her relationship with Martha Page, and Fae's last lover, June Walker, refers to Page as "that white woman." More relevant to this discussion is the way that Dunye's film visually highlights the racial aspect of the lesbian relationship between Cheryl and Diana, in scenes technically reminiscent of Spike Lee's *Jungle Fever* (1991). Viewers are treated to tight close-ups of Cheryl and Diana's black and white bodies pressed together in explicit sex scenes. Their hands roam across each other's naked bodies as the women kiss. At one point, the camera zooms in on the interlocked black and white hands of the two characters in bed. In this way, the film not only requires that black lesbians be acknowledged; it also documents the existence of interracial lesbian romances.¹

Avoiding Essentialism

Queer female producers of cultural texts must wrestle with the nature of lesbian subjectivity. In the wake of the complete destabilizing of subject formation that has resulted from the theoretical insights provided by a postmodern perspective, such artists face the challenge of "reconstruct[ing] lesbian subject positions without reinstating essentialisms" (Dolan 42). Dunye has risen to this challenge, as the characters in *The Watermelon Woman* do not present a monolithic view of any featured group. As Dolan argues, "Lesbians disappear under the liberal humanist insistence that they are just like everyone else. Difference is effectively elided by readability" (44). In this film, there is no unified lesbian subject position, either black or white. Cheryl, Tamara, their white video store coworker Annie, Tamara's black girlfriend Stacy, and Diana are all very different types of lesbians. They have different styles of fashion, different race and gender politics, and distinctive personalities. For example, Cheryl and Tamara have short, close-shaven haircuts, while Diana has long hair and wears lipstick. Stacy is a student finishing her MBA degree at Wharton; Tamara is obsessed with sex; Cheryl is passionate about filmmaking; and Diana wants to "figure out her life."

However, the film moves beyond merely presenting the wide variety of lesbian subject positions. The film addresses what is required "to reconstruct a tenable lesbian subject position . . . somewhere between deconstruction and essentialism" (Dolan 53). Dolan specifies what this new representation of lesbian subjectivity will entail:

Reconstructing a variable lesbian subject position that will not rise like a phoenix in a blaze of essentialism from the ashes of deconstruction requires emptying lesbian references of imposed truths, whether those of the dominant culture or those of lesbian radical feminist communities

which hold their own versions of truth. The remaining, complex, different referent, without truth, remains dependent on the materiality of actual lesbians who move in and out of dominant discourse in very different ways because of their positions within race, class, and variant expressions of their sexuality—dragging at the margins of structure and ideology. (53)

The Watermelon Woman answers Dolan's call, by refusing to accept the heritage of racist and heterosexist Hollywood cinema, by interweaving questions of sexuality and race, and by presenting lesbians who have conflicted relationships to dominant ideology. Additionally, the binary oppositions of "good" and "bad" identities are similarly deconstructed, as the film avoids simply reversing the dominant characterizations that attribute positive connotations to straight and/or white people and negative ones to gay and/or black people.

Although black lesbians, real and imagined, present and historical, are the focus in this text, the film presents a more complex view of lesbian subjectivity. The contrast between Cheryl and Tamara, for example, not only reflects the variety of subject positions of black lesbians; it also reveals the way that oppressions and their internalizations are layered and intertwined. Tamara advocates black lesbian solidarity, yet she reveals her own sexism throughout the film. Tamara frequently encourages the single Cheryl to "cruise" for "cute girls" and declares that she hopes to "get some" from her girlfriend Stacy on an upcoming date. When Tamara criticizes Cheryl at the video store, telling her "All you do since you don't have a girlfriend is watch those boring old films," Cheryl retorts, "I'd rather watch films than black porn like you." In this way, the internalized sexism of some lesbian women is presented through the character of Tamara, who views women as sexual objects. As always, this portrayal is presented with humor. For instance, one of the films Tamara orders from the video store is called *Bad Black Ballbusters*; Tamara justifies her film choice to Cheryl: "I was curious to see what they look like without hair."

Cheryl is caught in the crossfire of the various vectors that pressure her identity. She is not a typical lesbian in Tamara's eyes because she is not obsessed with finding a girlfriend and because she does not visually objectify women. Tamara sees an inevitable connection between a lesbian identity and chasing women: "We're lesbians—remember, Cheryl? We're *into* female-to-female attraction. Anyway, you're the one who's supposed to be clocking all the girls—how long has it been since you've been with one, anyway?" Cheryl's lack of preoccupation with women is evidence to Tamara that Cheryl is not behaving authentically as a lesbian. Cheryl has other struggles as a lesbian. She feels "set up" by Diana, who invites her to dinner and then seduces her. After she sleeps with Diana, Cheryl tells us in a voiceover, "I'm still in shock over the whole having-sex-with-Diana thing. I've never done anything else like that before, *let me assure you*. The hip, swinging lesbian style isn't my forte. . . . I'm just an old-fashioned girl trying to keep up with the times." For many viewers, the idea that all lesbians are alike will be shattered by these depictions.

The film also reveals the instability of racial subjectivity. Bob, the owner of the video store, is a black man who oozes sexism—and heterosexism—in his mistreatment of the women who work for him, black and white. Lee Edwards, the black gay race film expert, knows nothing about the watermelon woman or Martha Page. He excuses his ignorance of these two women, telling Cheryl and Tamara, "Women are not my specialty." And black feminist essentialism is

likewise critiqued in this film. Tamara, Cheryl, and Annie film a poetry reading by “Sistah Sound” at the local women’s community center. With African drumming for background rhythm, a black woman performs a poem that repeats “I am black woman, black woman, yes,” in a scene that both celebrates and pokes fun at such gatherings.

Racial politics also influence the relationship between Tamara and Cheryl, which becomes increasingly conflicted as the film’s narrative progresses. Tamara’s opinion of Diana is predicated on her wariness of white women. Tamara sees Diana as trying to usurp the black lesbian’s place in the world, calling her Cheryl’s “wannabe black girlfriend.” Tamara questions Cheryl’s alliance to black women once she begins dating Diana, telling Cheryl, “I see that once again you’re going out with a white girl acting like she wants to be black, and you’re being a black girl acting like she wants to be white. What’s up with you, Cheryl? Don’t you like the color of your skin?” While Cheryl defends herself to Tamara—defensively asking, “Who’s to say that dating somebody white doesn’t make me black?”—she is clearly uncomfortable when Diana reveals that she was born in Jamaica, and even more disturbed by Diana’s revelations that she has had black boyfriends in the past and that her “father’s sister’s first husband was an ex-Panther” whose name was “Tyrone Washington.”² Moreover, both the white lesbian archivist as well as the white sister of Martha Page, with whom Diana has arranged an interview, treat Cheryl condescendingly. When Diana does not stand up to Mrs. Page-Fletcher when she refers to “all those coloreds” that Martha Page employed and when she denies her sister’s lesbianism, Cheryl has had enough. Thus, while Cheryl rejects Tamara’s essentialist view of black lesbian identity, she struggles with race dynamics in her relationship nonetheless.

Likewise, Cheryl argues against June Walker’s call for Cheryl to eliminate Martha Page from her film. In a letter to Cheryl, the woman who was Fae Richards’ lover for the last twenty years of her life says,

I was so mad that you mentioned the name of Martha Page. Why do you even want to include a white woman in a movie on Fae’s life? Don’t you know she had nothing to do with how people should remember Fae? I think it troubled her soul for the world to see her in those mammy pictures. . . . If you really are in “the family,” you better understand that our family will only have each other.³

Cheryl responds to June’s letter in her last monologue, insisting that there is no one black lesbian subject position, and declaring that she might make different choices about the meaning of this black actress’s legacy. Cheryl tells June, “I know she meant the world to you, but she also meant the world to me, and those worlds are different.” She refuses to erase the history of Fae’s romance with the white woman director from her film: “The moments she shared with you—the life she had with Martha, on and off the screen—those are precious moments, and nobody can change that.” She then points to the generational differences in operation in this debate, “But what she means to *me*—a twenty-five-year-old black woman, means something else,” explaining how this figure inspires her as a black, lesbian filmmaker.

This film calls into question the idea of “difference” itself. The character Annie, the young, white lesbian who works with Cheryl and Tamara in the video store, has blond streaks in her black hair and wears a dog collar. Cheryl and Annie get along well, but Tamara bristles at the girl’s street style and sense of self-confidence. When Cheryl asks her why she so dislikes Annie,

Tamara retorts, "She gets on my last black lesbian nerve with all that piercing and hair dye business." When Cheryl reminds her that they also share a marginalized status—"Tamara, you know we're different, too"—Tamara reverts to segregationist and classist arguments to justify her denigration of Annie: "Yeah, but see we're not different amongst a group of ritzy black folk. I mean, we were there to get their business and to be professional. We weren't there to look like a bunch of hip-hop multicultural mess." She says that she is disgusted by Annie's way of dressing and by her dog collar. Later in the video store back room, Tamara tells Annie, "You're so helpful—you probably know a place to get a good clit piercing, don't you?" Annie responds, "Look Tamara, just because you and I are different doesn't mean you have to treat me like shit all the time." The conflict between these two women highlights the fragmentation and multiplicity in lesbian subject positions, as well as the way that different aspects of identity are sometimes at cross purposes with one another. This film undercuts the essentialist assumptions of both oppressive and liberatory positions, undermining a heterosexual view that lumps together all gay people, as well as an anti-racist view that would promote an essentialist view of all white people. In this way, the film moves beyond what hooks calls the "de-center[ing] of the white patriarchal gaze" (Dash and hooks 40) to question the racist heterosexual gaze, including the potentially homophobic gaze of non-white straight viewers, as well as the potentially racist gaze of white lesbian viewers. The film enacts this decentering both visually, as interracial lesbian romances are prominently pictured, and diegetically, through the conflicts of its characters. Revealing their racist and heterosexual agenda, the American Family Association labeled the film's depictions of lesbian sex "smut" (McAlister). However, the film forces even those viewers who are not on the "right wing" end of the political spectrum to confront their own prejudices.

The film also contains a complex presentation of class identity. The video store owner, Bob, wields power over his three female employees, incessantly berating them for not being familiar enough with what he calls "the Bob system," although they clearly know how to perform their jobs well. While Tamara and Cheryl barely make ends meet, and while Cheryl must work hard at two jobs in order to finance her film project, Diana is well-off financially, as indicated by the credit cards she flashes at the video store, by the spacious apartment she rents while she takes time off from school, and by the fact that she does not work during the time of the film, but volunteers with homeless children of color (a race dynamic that does not go unremarked upon by Tamara). In contrast to Diana's life of leisure, Cheryl and Tamara have had to resort to a "tape scam" at work in order to secure videos for themselves, films for Cheryl's research and porn movies for Tamara's enjoyment. They rent tapes under customers' names, preview them, and return them, as Cheryl explains to Diana. Finally, we learn that Annie is a Bryn Mawr college graduate, yet she needs the job at the video store, pointing to the way that college degrees no longer guarantee security in the work force. Even the parodied lesbian archives (in the film called C.L.I.T.—the Center for Lesbian Information and Technology) struggle financially, relying on volunteer help and not having a catalogued organization yet in place. The documentary portions similarly present class dimensions of the characters' experiences. Fae Richards, we learn, was a maid before she became an actress. Black cast films eventually became passé in part because even black audiences wanted to see Hollywood films instead, as Lee Edwards explains to Cheryl and Tamara. Although Tamara points to the real connection between race, power, and wealth when she refers to "the white folks at the bank" at the film's outset, in this film, there are no clear correlations between race, gender, sexual orientation, and

class status. The film does not undertake an explicit class critique, but it does convey the oppressive elements of class and the way that class position meshes with and influences other types of identity formation.

(Re)writing History

The Watermelon Woman draws upon “pseudo-realism, borrowing heavily from the documentary format” (Turoff). The viewer’s relationship to the film’s presentation of “truth”—that is, whether or not the viewer is aware that “the watermelon woman” is a fictionalized construction—pivotaly influences the viewing experience. For example, I first viewed this film at a local cinema in the spring of 1997. During the entire film, I was unaware that Fae “The Watermelon Woman” Richards is a fictional creation of Dunye’s; I was shocked to read in the credits an acknowledgment of the fictionality of this character. At the time, I believed that Dunye’s inclusion of this information in the credits revealed that the filmmaker did not anticipate that viewers would necessarily realize that the black actress named Fae Richards never existed. For while Dunye deconstructs and satirizes the documentary form throughout the film, she also replicates it in a way that leads viewers not to question its verisimilitude. In fact, the Internet Movie Database even goes so far as to list the film’s genre as “Documentary.”

Since the time of my initial viewing of the film, I have learned that when the film was first screened, it did not contain any reference to the fictional status of Fae Richards, so the film’s first viewers were not aware of this dimension of the film (Jackson and Moore 500). Conversely, some viewers do not have the privilege of seeing the film and sorting through this issue of the actress’s fictionality for themselves. I saw the film a second time while in London in August of 1998. Although I was thrilled that such a film was being shown on British television (as part of Channel 4’s “Queer Street” series), and although I was prepared to watch the film again from a position of already knowing its “secret,” I was dismayed to see that the British weekly magazine *Time Out* directly indicated that Fae Richards was not a real person in its description of the film. I knew that British first-time viewers would approach the film much differently because they already were aware that its documentary was staged.

Thus, there are three possible viewing positions of the film: never learning that the documentary portions record a fictional subject’s life; realizing while viewing the film, or learning during the film’s credits that Dunye created the character of Fae Richards; and knowing about the actress’s fictional status at the film’s outset, for example, after having read a review of the film. (I am aware that this article itself, ironically, reproduces this last dynamic for readers who have not yet seen the film.) Another irony is that while the issue of secrecy and confession are typically associated with gay identity, this film does not conceal homosexuality, but instead contains a “secret” about the fictional nature of the subject of the central character’s documentary. Having now watched the film for a third time on video, I am convinced that much of its power comes from the ambiguity of the figure of Fae Richards. Dunye leads the viewer to ask herself why she is unfamiliar with this actress, a questioning that has significant implications for thinking through the relationship among media texts, politics and history. Watching the film from the position of not knowing that the documentary subject is fictional enables viewers to appreciate fully the way that this film “create[s] a certain tension between the social formation, subjectivity, and representation” (Kaplan 138).

Bobo reminds us that, “Within the last several decades black women have effectively written themselves back into history; they have retrieved their collective past for sustenance and encouragement for present-day protest movements” (36). In some ways, Dunye’s film is situated within this tradition. However, Dunye’s final remarks make clear that she was unable to retrieve this history she wanted to find; in the credits she tells viewers: “Sometimes you have to create your own history,” explaining that “The Watermelon Woman is fiction.” Yet although Dunye rewrites a history that is/was not there, she does so with a firm grounding in historical realities for black people, particularly black women, in this century. For example, Cheryl’s search for information on the watermelon woman leads her to interview her mother and others who were part of the vibrant black club scene in Philadelphia in the interwar decades. Cheryl learns that black films were played before the Hollywood features at the early 20th-century black-owned cinemas from Lee Edwards, who tells her, “If they’d only played the black cast films, they would’ve gone out of business during the Depression. Black folks [in the ’20s and ’30s] wanted to see the Hollywood stuff with the stars, the costumes—all that junk.” In such segments of the film, Dunye informs viewers about lost pieces of African-American history through her construction of Fae Richards’ history and her fictional account of Cheryl’s investigation of it.

The film liberally uses photographs in its documentary portions. The photograph is a textual form that supposedly signifies “this really happened” to the viewer; it testifies to the existence of people and events. Yet, in this case, the photographs have been created for this film, and the history they purportedly record is fabricated. In a further irony, these photographs are now objects of textual analysis themselves. A journal published in West Germany, *Parkett*, contains an article entitled, “Watermelon Woman: The Fae Richards Photo Archives.” The abstract for this article specifies that it contains “A selection of photographs from a series created for use in Cheryl Dunye’s film *The Watermelon Woman*.” The abstract goes on to tell us, “Created in collaboration with Zoe Leonard, the photographs depict scenes from the life of a fictional character, Fae Richards.” So the constructed figure of this black lesbian actress visually lives on, at least in the world of academic cultural criticism.

The feminist cultural critic Jeanie Forte, in the words of Jill Dolan, “suggests that because of its structural recognizability, or ‘readability,’ realism might be able to politicize spectators alienated by the more experimental conventions of non-realistic work” (43). This film draws upon this strategy of textual production. Both the film’s narrative portions and the film’s documentary segments contain realist aspects and are, as such, “readable” to the film’s viewers. However, in the juxtaposition of these two “stories,” the film enacts a postmodern deconstruction of both realist cinema and documentary forms. The film’s metafictional elements, such as Cheryl’s asides to the film’s viewer, further serve to destabilize the film’s realistic quality. And this critique of realism is also a critique of the racist politics often promoted by the mainstream mass media’s realist presentations; as bell hooks explains, “one of the major problems facing black filmmakers is the way both spectators and, often, the dominant culture want to reduce us to some narrow notion of ‘real’ or ‘accurate’” (Dash and hooks 31). *The Watermelon Woman* seduces viewers with realist elements, only to make us question our naïveté at the film’s end, and in this way the film disrupts the naturalizing function of realist discourse.

This film’s technical qualities, such as the use of montage, talking-head interviews, segments that appear to be from early film news spots, and film footage with an archival look, lead

viewers to perceive the text initially as based upon reality. They see all the film's characters as "ethnographic subjects" and believe the film to be "Dunye's casually taped, autobiographical video journal" (Jackson and Moore 500). This reading of the film goes against what film critic E. Ann Kaplan recommends for a "counter-cinema" such as feminist cinema (131). She argues that filmmakers

must confront within their films the accepted representations of reality so as to expose their falseness. Realism as a style is unable to change consciousness because it does not depart from the forms that embody the old consciousness. Thus, prevailing realist codes—of camera, lighting, sound, editing, mise-en-scène—must be abandoned and the cinematic apparatus used in a new way so as to challenge audiences' expectations and assumptions about life. (131)

The Watermelon Woman confronts realism not by presenting a film that radically breaks from realist form; rather, this film reworks Kaplan's formulation so that the challenge to viewers comes at the film's end, when we are often shocked to see that the documentary subject matter within the film has been constructed and when we thus must confront our own ideological investments that led us to misinterpret this aspect of the film.

In contrast, viewers who read about the film's fictional elements in reviews or who have previously seen the film with the final disclaimer included, are more able to appreciate the film's humor. In the words of Randy Turoff, the film is "savvy, wry, and self-consciously ironic." One way that the film employs humor is to enact a critique of what bell hooks calls "the Eurocentric biases that have informed our understanding of the African American experience" (Dash and hooks 39). Particularly through a scene featuring a mock interview of the white cultural scholar Camille Paglia, the film comments on the way that white scholars appropriate and treat condescendingly the work of non-white scholars. Paglia tells us,

Well, actually, the mammy figure is a great favorite of mine, particularly Hattie McDaniels' brilliant performance in *Gone with the Wind*. I really am distressed with a lot of the tone of recent African American scholarship. [cut] It tries to say about the mammy that her largeness as a figure is de-sexualizing, degrading, and de-humanizing, and this seems to me utterly wrong. Where the large woman is a symbol of abundance and fertility, is a kind of goddess figure.

Demonstrating the way that white critics often falsely bring their own life histories and experiences to bear on those of the non-white objects of their investigations, Paglia continues:

Even the presence of the mammy in the kitchen it seems to me has been misinterpreted: 'Oh the woman in the kitchen is a slave, a subordinate—' Well, my grandmas, my Italian grandmothers, never left the kitchen. In fact this is why I dedicated my first book to them. And Hattie McDaniel in *Gone with the Wind* is the *spitting image* of my grandmother, in her style, in her attitude, in her ferocity. It brings tears to my eyes.

That I did not originally view this interview as a satire says a lot about my opinion of Camilla Paglia as a feminist critic, but the fact that almost all of the film's other initial viewers, college students and art house audiences, missed the irreverent and exaggerated portrayal here also speaks to the power of the film's precise simulation of the documentary form, right down to the title at the bottom of the screen at this interview's outset, "Camille Paglia, Cultural Critic." Alexandra Juhasz emphasizes that "many of the codes of documentary label, categorize, and imply understandings of authority," revealing that documentary images are not merely recording nor undermining traditional power relations, but rather, deepening them (98). Audiences have been taught to view the documentary's elements evidenced in *The Watermelon Woman* as indications of a person's credibility and expertise, and thus, initial audiences did not question this woman's authority. Additionally, because similar trends exist in academic criticism, where members of groups in power presume to speak for "marginalized" groups, Camille Paglia's monologue did not seem outside the realm of truth or possibility. As Bobo makes clear, there is "an unstated presumption that the only reliable information about [black women] is that collected by white observers" (11). Camille Paglia's character romanticizes representations of African-American women in her commentary; for instance, she completely elides the impact of slavery or issues of unequal power relations, yet viewers seduced by the realist coding of her presentation miss the film's implicit critique of racism in this section.

In the last point that Paglia makes in her "interview," the white scholar's actions are carried to their greatest point of exaggeration. As before, Paglia continues to speak rapidly, rarely pausing for breath, and to gesture frequently with her hands, in a parody of the ludicrous connections that some scholars often make in their work:

The watermelon, it seems to me, is another image that has been misinterpreted by a lot of black commentary—the great extended family Italian get together that I remember as a child ended with the men bringing out a watermelon and ritualistically cutting it, distributing the pieces to everyone, almost like the communion service. [cut] And I really dislike these kinds of reductionism of a picture of, let's say, a small black boy with a watermelon, him smiling broadly over it, looking at that as negative. Why is that not, instead, a symbol of joy? and pleasure, and fruitfulness? After all, a piece of watermelon has the colors of the Italian flag—red, white, and green—so I'm biased to that extent. I think that if the watermelon symbolizes African American culture, then rightly so, because look what white, middle-class feminism stands for—anorexia and bulimia—

In this way, the film shows us not only how women of color must go up against white control of signifying practices, but also demonstrates the oppressiveness of the racist interpretation of signs (as well as the ridiculousness of much of the esoteric ideas of contemporary criticism).

The Watermelon Woman again parallels *Daughters of the Dust* in that "part of what [the film] does is construct for us an imaginative universe around the question of blackness and black identity" in an examination that the director does "situate historically," as bell hooks comments to Julie Dash about her film (28). Dunye takes this imaginative creation and historical situating a step further, however, because she has had to create a history of a lesbian black celebrity; these women, too, are invisible in our received history of popular culture. After the Paglia interview, we see Cheryl interviewing white (lesbian-looking) women on the street. One says that she has

heard of Martha Page, but does not know the watermelon woman. Another adds, "If she's in anything after the 1960s, don't ask us, we haven't covered women and blaxploitation yet," again parodically pointing to the way that the institutionalization of women's studies and African-American studies have yet to transcend gendered and racialized stereotypes in their curriculums. The film then segues back to Camille Paglia, who tells Cheryl, "I'm stunned to hear that the director was lesbian or bisexual" and that "any kind of interracial relationship at this time [is] mind-boggling," remarks that reveal how heterosexism and racism often underlie the romanticization of the celebrated white creators of popular culture's representations. When Paglia tells Cheryl, "This is an astounding discovery that you've made," she seems jealous of the young black woman, even though she then wishes her good luck. The competition amongst cultural scholars is invoked in this exchange.

At film's end, Cheryl addresses the viewer. She speaks to the concerns raised in June Walker's letter, explaining to Walker that they have different experiences of Fae Richards and thus she means different things to each of them, as described above. Cheryl then elaborates about what remembering this actress means to her:

It means hope; it means inspiration; it means possibility. It means *history*. And most important what I understand is it means that I am gonna be the one who says, "I am a black, lesbian filmmaker," who's just beginning, but I'm gonna say a lot more and have a lot more work to do. Anyway—what you've all been waiting for—the biography of Fae Richards. Faith Richardson.

This monologue is followed by a series of images, including simulated filmstills and scenes from films, depicting the life of Fae Richards, in chronological order, narrated by Cheryl's voiceover. This "biography" is interspersed with titles giving the film's credits, and in the middle of this "documentary," the title that explains the fictionality of the character flashes by, rather quickly, I might add. Thus, we learn then that all of these "meanings" of Fae Richards to Cheryl—hope, inspiration, possibility, history—are, to some extent, illusions. Dunye had to make up a history of a black lesbian actress; in other words, she had to create her own hope, inspiration and possibility through the creation of a history that was not, but could have been, in some ways should have been, there. However, this undoing of the power of the influence of Fae Richards is not total. For Cheryl's ending statement, while spoken by a fictional character about, we soon learn, another fictional character, documents a real black lesbian filmmaker, Cheryl Dunye, who has acted on hope, inspiration and a sense of possibility through her (meta)fictional text. Thus Cheryl's declaration that she will be the one who says that she is a black, lesbian filmmaker is found to be true in Dunye, and in the end we are left to ponder just what effort it took for her to realize that proclamation, to reflect upon the invisibility of black lesbians in American popular culture.

NOTES

1. However, while the film breaks with convention in highlighting an interracial lesbian romance, its ultimate commentary on such relationships—especially between African-American and white women—is that they are unlikely to overcome the difficulties related to social

dynamics that often plague such relationships. Class differences, including Diana's racist fetishization of the "Other," come between Cheryl and Diana in the end, and the film encourages us to speculate that racist social norms of the mid-century came between Fae Richards and Martha Page.

2. Scenes such as this only "work" in this film because they are exaggeratedly humorous and because they also ring true as well. It is likely that viewers are familiar with white women who fetishize people of color, and who date them in the spirit of this fetishization.
3. Here Walker invokes a phrase used throughout the film, "the family," slang for "homosexual," or, more specifically, "lesbian." In this passage, the character of June Walker makes it clear that "family" for her includes race and is limited to lesbians who are also women of color.

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